

JOINING UP THE DOTS:

Why **urgent action is needed to tackle the
sexualisation of women and girls in the
media and popular culture**

OBJECT MAY 2009

CHALLENGING OBJECTIFICATION

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executive summary and recommendations

- Three integrated strategies to tackle violence against women have recently been proposed – by the Government, Conservative Party and Mayor of London. It is vital that strategies to end gender-based violence include meaningful and effective action to prevent violence against women from happening in the first place. Such action should aim to kick start a cultural shift – so that contributory factors to violence against women are no longer accepted or seen as ‘inevitable’. One such factor is the increased sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture. Firm action to tackle gendered sexualisation will therefore play a critical role in creating a much-needed cultural shift.
- The sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture is increasingly prevalent across many forms of media, from television, video games, the internet, film, advertising and clothing to products, animated cartoons, magazines and news. It is linked to the continued mainstreaming of the sex industry and the ‘pornification of culture’.
- A growing body of research has firmly linked the sexual objectification of women and girls to a negative effect on individual health and well being, with increased sexualisation leading to severe dissatisfaction over body image and self esteem; high rates of eating disorders among women and girls; rising levels of women turning to plastic surgery; increased incidences of sexual bullying and damaging sexual relations between young people.
- The sexual objectification of women is also linked to the promotion and reinforcement of sexist attitudes – via exposure to media which overwhelmingly contains gender stereotyping and affects perceptions of all women. This has significant overlap with racism via the objectification of women according to their ethnicity. Finally a large body of evidence demonstrates the connection between the sexualisation of women in the media and popular culture with violence against women.
- Popular arguments against taking action on this issue are centred around the human right of individuals to freedom of expression. However, such a right must be weighed against the need and importance of taking effective steps to protect the human right of women and girls to live their lives free of gender-based violence and discrimination. Moreover freedom of expression is a complicated issue – given that how individuals choose to express themselves is heavily influenced by the media and popular culture.
- The current UK framework prioritises the right to freedom of expression of the media– ignoring the fact that the media is just as motivated by economics as it is by freedom of expression. In terms of gender equality and reducing violence against women the media currently faces no meaningful obligations or incentives to show social responsibility, yet it is increasingly clear that market forces alone cannot guarantee socially just outcomes.

Recommendations

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

- Gender equality to be mainstreamed into media regulation - at present concerns relating to the sexualisation of women are judged solely on the grounds of obscenity and decency. This must be extended to **gender equality** by bodies such as OFCOM and ASA. This regulation should be enacted via **legislation**. Voluntary 'codes' have proved meaningless in relation to a long-term impact.
- Anti-racial discrimination measures should be extended to include anti-sex discrimination measures so that incitement to gender hatred is outlawed, in line with incitement to racial hatred.
- Positive incentives for improved media representation to be enacted. A Gender Equality media watchdog should be created and given sufficient powers to actually deliver change. Incentives for positive gender reporting in the media should also be created to improve accountability and provide models of best practice.

Department for Children, Schools and Family (DCFS)

- National Curriculum to include media literacy from a gendered perspective to equip young women and men with the tools to identify gender stereotyping and distorted coverage of gender roles.
- Sex Education and PSHE to include information on the harms of pornography to counter its impact and influence on sexual relations and sexist attitudes.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

- Since 2003 Jobcentre Plus has carried adverts for positions as 'lap dancers', 'masseuses', strip webcam performers and 'escorts'. By doing so the DWP is, in effect, acting as a noticeboard for pimps within the sex industry. It is alarming that government job agencies are legitimising the exploitation and abuse experienced by many women and girls in prostitution. This also legitimises attitudes underpinning discrimination and violence against women. The Department for Work and Pensions should reverse this policy.

Home Office

- Prostitution, pornography and lap dancing should be included in the cross-governmental strategy as they constitute and promote violence against women.
- Increasing normalisation of the sex industry should be challenged by ensuring lap dancing licensing reforms apply universally across England and Wales and apply to all lap dancing venues – regardless of how frequently lap dancing is occurring.
- Sustainable funding should be allocated to assist women and girls to exit prostitution and firm measures should be taken to tackle the demand for exploitation through prostitution. This should be linked to other policy developments in this area – as currently proposed in the Policing and Crime Bill – which form an important first step towards adopting ‘Nordic’ policy on prostitution. This approach decriminalises all persons selling sexual acts and provides support services and exit strategies to those currently in prostitution, whilst criminalising the buyers of sexual acts to curb the demand which fuels prostitution and trafficking. The Home Office should introduce legislation which *fully* matches this approach – current proposals go only part of the way by criminalising the purchase of sexual acts from persons “subject to force”.

1 context

The *End Violence Against Women Coalition* (EVAW) – the largest coalition of women’s organisations in the UK- has campaigned since 2004 for a cross-government integrated strategy to tackle endemic violence against women. This work has been supported by the Women’s National Commission (WNC) and has recently culminated in the proposal of a range of for strategies to tackle violence against women, as set out below:

Date	Who?	Proposal
April 2009	The Mayor of London	<i>‘The way forward: a call for action to end violence against women’</i> – sets out a proposed programme of action ¹
March 2009	Home Office	<i>Together we can end violence against women’</i> - consultation paper on a cross-governmental strategy ² .
December 2008	The Conservative Party	<i>‘Ending Violence Against Women’</i> -strategy paper for a cross-governmental strategy ³ .

It is **vital** that these strategies include **meaningful and effective action** to prevent violence against women from occurring in the first place. Such action should aim to kick start a cultural shift – so that contributory factors to violence against women are firstly recognised in order to be seen as unacceptable and then acted upon. It is well established – for example at the international level by CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) - that one such factor is the increased sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture. Firm action to tackle gendered sexualisation will therefore play a critical role in creating a much-needed cultural shift – as has been pointed out by EVAW in every ‘Making the Grade’ report since 2005.

“The sexualisation of popular culture and the ubiquity of sexualised imagery of women were described by stakeholder organisations at all the consultation events as conducive contexts for violence against women”

Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations: A Template for an Integrated Strategy on Violence Against Women for the UK (2008)
End Violence Against Women Coalition

¹ <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/crime/vaw/>

² <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/cons-2009-vaw/>

³ http://www.conservatives.com/News/Blogs/~/_media/Files/Policy%20Documents/violence-against-women.ashx

Like OBJECT, EVAW firmly links the increasing sexualisation of women to the mainstreaming of the sex industry – which has served to normalise the commodification and sexualisation of women through mediums such as lap dancing, and prostitution⁴. In the case of lap dancing this has been facilitated by the licensing of lap dancing clubs as leisure venues such as restaurants or cinemas⁵. The following table shows current gaps in policy proposals to tackle violence against women:

Policy Proposal	Addresses sexualisation of women and girls	Addresses mainstreaming of the sex industry
<p>Mayor of London: <i>“The way forward: a call for action to end violence against women”</i></p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Yes: calls for tougher action on lap dancing clubs and cutting demand for prostitution.</p>
<p>Home Office: <i>“Together we can end violence against women”</i> Home Office</p>	<p>Yes: consultation includes a “fact-finding review into the increasing ‘sexualisation’ of teenage girls” and invites responses to the question “<i>Is there a link between sexualised images, perceptions and actual violence?</i>”</p>	<p>No: the consultation solely details <i>other</i> policy work undertaken to tackle trafficking and includes no specific proposals for such work to be incorporated in the violence against women strategy.</p>
<p>Conservative Party: <i>“Ending Violence Against Women”</i></p>	<p>Yes: “we must be honest about the growing sexualisation of our society, and be sensitive to the way in which women are portrayed in the media”. <i>However</i> no clarification of what this would entail.</p>	<p>Yes: although this is limited to tackling trafficking “We will also look at targeting potential ‘consumers’ and ‘employers’ through public campaigns in order to highlight the suffering caused by forced labour and prostitution”.</p>

⁴ EVAW *Making the Grade* 2005, 2006, 2007 & *Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations: A Template for an Integrated Strategy on Violence Against Women for the UK* 2008: <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/pages/resources.html>

⁵ *A Growing Tide: Local Authorities Restricted by Inadequate Licensing of Lap Dancing Clubs* OBJECT April 2008

2 evidence of the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture

The unbalanced and stereotyped portrayal of women in the media and popular culture hinges on two connected issues. Firstly, women are often under-represented in much of the media. Moreover – where they *are* portrayed women are disproportionately sexualised, stereotyped and objectified. This has markedly increased over the last ten to fifteen years and spans many different types of media and business forms⁶.

A driving force behind the sexualisation of women and girls in popular culture is the growing mainstreaming of the commercial sex industry. The past three decades has seen pornography become increasingly prevalent in print newspapers and on the internet⁷; lap dancing clubs become popular venues for business use and ‘leisure use’⁸ and prostitution glamourised in the media as a quick way to earn easy money (for example the ‘Belle de Jour’ television and book series⁹). The commercial sex industry is therefore increasingly available and normalised in our culture- as demonstrated by research showing a rise in the reported buying of sexual acts¹⁰ and a rapid increase in the number of UK lap dancing clubs¹¹.

“The latest strip club to hit The City aims to provide bankers with a night of attractive women. Most girls range from mildly attractive to hot - most with good firm bodies to fit different tastes. From the slim girls with fake breasts to the voluptuous with natural curves, you'll no doubt find someone to appeal. Varying in prettiness they're good dancers across the board so it's up to you what you find attractive and where you want to splash the cash!”

Listings review for a lap dancing club located in the City of London (www.viewlondon.co.uk/clubs/for-your-eyes-only-review-20305.html)

This is frequently described as a generic ‘sexualisation of culture’ in which sexualised imagery is increasingly prevalent¹². However closer analysis reveals that it is in fact heavily gendered – with women and girls disproportionately portrayed as sexual objects. Images stemming from pornography and the sex industry dominate the representation of women and this has been termed ‘the pornification of culture’ by leading academics¹³.

⁶ Gill, R (2007) *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press

⁷ Saarenmaa, Laura, Susanna Paasonen and Kaarina Nikunen (2007) *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture*. Berg Publishers.

⁸ Sanders, T (2008) *Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex*. Devon: Willan

⁹ <http://www.itv.com/Drama/contemporary/TheSecretDiaryofaCallGirl/default.html>

¹⁰ Coy, Maddy; Hovarth, Miranda; Kelly, Liz (2007) *It's just like going to the Supermarket: Men buying sex in East London*, London Metropolitan University, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, report produced for Safe Exit at Toynbee Hall.

¹¹ ‘A Growing Tide: Local Authorities restricted by inadequate licensing of lap dancing clubs’ (April 2008) OBJECT

¹² For example Attwood, F., Brunt, R & Cere, R (Eds) *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus

¹³ Eg. Gill, R (2007) Gill, Rosalind (2007) *Supersexualize Me! Advertising and ‘the midriffs’*. Chapter prepared for Attwood, F., Bunter & Carer (Eds) *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualisation of Western Culture*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus

The following evidence demonstrates how women and girls are increasingly sexualised in the media and popular culture. It also joins the dots between this and mainstreaming of the sex industry:

Television

The world depicted on our television screens is disproportionately male¹⁴. The UK actors' union Equity launched a campaign earlier this year calling for equal representation in television, stating that for every two male roles in a drama there is just one female role¹⁵.

Television programmes also disproportionately sexualise women and girls¹⁶. Academic research shows that a significant proportion of screen time involves the trivialisation of sexism and comments which characterise women as sex objects. For example analysis of popular US comedies (most of which are exported to the UK) found that 23% of sexual comments involved catcalling / leering/ staring at women¹⁷. Other studies have found a high frequency of sexual harassment incidents in prime time television¹⁸.

Music Videos

44%–81% of music videos contain sexual imagery¹⁹. Women are far more likely than men to be presented in provocative or revealing clothing²⁰ and sexually objectified – often through imagery linked to the sex industry, such as pole/ lap dancing²¹.

Women are frequently portrayed as decorative objects that dance and pose and do not play any instruments²². Contrary to popular belief this is not restricted to hip hop or pop. In one analysis of country music videos, 42% of female artists were coded as wearing “alluring clothing”²³. Analysis of MTV music videos has found objectification in 44.4% of the 30-second clips analysed²⁴.

¹⁴ Eaton, C. (1997). Prime-time stereotyping on the new television networks. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74, 859-872.

¹⁵ <http://www.equity.org.uk/article.aspx?id=151>

¹⁶ Eaton, C. (1997). Prime-time stereotyping on the new television networks. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74, 859-872.

¹⁷ Lampman, C., Rolfe-Maloney, B., David, E. J., Yan, M., McCermott, N., Winters, S., et al. (2002, Fall). Messages about sex in the workplace: A content analysis of primetime television. *Sexuality & Culture*, 6, 3-21.

¹⁸ Grauerholz, E., & King, A. (1997). Primetime sexual harassment. *Violence Against Women*, 3, 129-148; Montemurro, B. (2003). Not a laughing matter: Sexual harassment as “material” on workplace-based situation comedies. *Sex Roles*, 48, 433-445.

¹⁹ Gow, J. (1996). Reconsidering gender roles on MTV: Depictions in the most popular music videos of the early

1990s. *Communication Reports*, 9, 151-161; Greeson, L. E., & Williams, R.A. (1986). Social implications of music videos for youth: An analysis of the contents and effects of MTV. *Youth and Society*, 18, 177-189; Pardun, C. J., & McKee, K. B. (1995). Strange bedfellows: Symbols of religion and sexuality on MTV. *Youth & Society*, 26, 438-449; Sherman, B. L., & Dominick, J. R. (1986). Violence and sex in music videos: TV and rock n roll. *Journal of Communication*, 36, 79-93.

²⁰ Andsager, J., & Roe, K. (2003). “What’s your definition of dirty, baby?”: Sex in music videos. *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 7(3), 79-97; Seidman, S. A. (1992). An investigation of sex-role stereotyping in music videos. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 36, 209-216; Sommers-Flanagan, R.

²¹ Sommers-Flanagan, R., Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Davis, B. (1993). What’s happening on music television? A gender role content analysis. *Sex Roles*, 28, 745-753.

²² Arnett, J. J. (2002). The sounds of sex: Sex in teens’ music and music videos. In J. Brown, K. Walsh-Childers, & J. Steele (Eds.), *Sexual teens, sexual media* (pp. 253-264). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum; Gow, J. (1996). Reconsidering gender roles on MTV: Depictions in the most popular music videos of the early 1990s. *Communication Reports*, 9, 151-161.

²³ Andsager, J., & Roe, K. (2003). “What’s your definition of dirty, baby?”: Sex in music videos. *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 7(3), 79-97.

²⁴ Sommers-Flanagan, R., Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Davis, B. (1993). What’s happening on music television? A gender role content analysis. *Sex Roles*, 28, 745-753.

Film

There is a near absence of female characters in the top income generating films²⁵. A recent study analysed the 101 top-box office income General-rated films from 1990 to 2004. Of the over 4,000 characters in these films, 75% overall were male, 83% of characters in crowds were male, 83% of narrators were male, and 72% of speaking characters were male²⁶.

“[the] gross underrepresentation of women or girls in films ... reflects a missed opportunity to present a broad spectrum of girls and women in roles that are non-sexualised”.

American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

Animated films and cartoons

Recent films and TV programmes directed towards children have shown increased sexualisation of women such as sexualised costumes in *Ella Enchanted* and the parody of a female stripper in *Shrek 2*²⁷. Contemporary Disney characters e.g. *The Little Mermaid* or *Pocahontas*, are represented with more cleavage, fewer clothes, and more heavily sexualised than previously²⁸.

Magazines

Academic analysis of young women’s magazines has shown that girls are repeatedly encouraged to look and dress in specific ways to look sexy for men, a phenomenon labelled “costuming for seduction” by researchers²⁹. Such studies reveal that attracting the attention of boys by looking “hot” and “sexy” is the main purpose of many of the articles, text, cover lines, ads, and photographs in women’s magazines.

Men’s magazines and ‘lads’ mags’ consistently promote sexist attitudes through their objectification of women, pornographic imagery and overt promotion of contempt and disrespect (often under the guise of ‘irony’ or ‘retrosexism’³⁰) and are directly linked to pornography and prostitution through their imagery and promotional features on the sex industry and the extensive advertising in their back pages. Links between magazines targeting men and those targeting women are also evident – for example *More Magazine* (targeted to the 16- 24 age bracket) promotes FHM ‘High Street Honey’ contests – competitions in which women are encouraged to send in ‘glamorous’ pictures of themselves

²⁵ Bazzini, D. G., McIntosh, W. D., Smith, S. M., Cook, S., & Harris, C. (1997). The aging women in popular film: Underrepresented, unattractive, unfriendly, and unintelligent. *Sex Roles*, 36, 531-553.

²⁶ Kelly, J., & Smith, S. L. (2006). *Where the girls aren't: Gender disparity saturates G-rated films* [Research brief]. Retrieved August 31, 2006, from www.thriveoncreative.com/clients/seejane/pdfs/where.the.girls.arent.pdf

²⁷ Lamb, S., & Brown, L. M. (2006). *Packaging girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers' schemes*. New York: St. Martin's Press; Levin, D. E. (2005). So sexy, so soon: The sexualization of childhood. In S. Olfman (Ed.), *Childhood lost: How American culture is failing our kids* (pp. 137-153). Westport, CT: Praeger Press.

²⁸ Lacroix, C. (2004). Images of animated others: The Orientalization of Disney's cartoon heroines from the Little Mermaid to the Hunchback of Notre Dame. *Popular Communication*, 2, 213-229.

²⁹ Duffy, M., & Gotcher, J. M. (1996). Crucial advice on how to get the guy: The rhetorical vision of power and seduction in the teen magazine *YM*. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 20, 32-48.

³⁰ Gill, R. (2007) *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press

and are advised to ‘dress sexily’³¹. This is unsurprising given both are owned by the same media corporation³².

**“ ‘How to be a Honey’ FHM’s deputy editor Chris Bell reveals the tricks...
- Dress sexily. For some reason bikinis, lingerie and high heels seem to impress the judges. Weird.
- Send a variety of photos, not just the one that miraculously disguises your hump.
- Groom yourself. Especially ‘down there’ if you’re in your bikini or underwear. Or snap from the waist up. And please hide that Playboy tattoo”.**

More magazine, 28 July 2008

Comparison of both men’s (Playboy) and women’s (Cosmopolitan) magazines concluded that both types of magazines portray female sexuality in similar ways despite appealing to different audiences. Men’s and women’s magazines both depict women as sexualised objects whose desire is best fulfilled by making themselves into commodities that are sexually available to men. The primary difference was that women’s magazines are not as crude, aggressive or as men’s magazines³³.

Video games

The vast majority of young people regularly play video games - 87% of younger children and 70% of adolescents³⁴. Games contain highly sexualized content and few strong female characters³⁵. Where strong female characters are portrayed they are still sexualised, for example the character of Lara Croft.

In a recent study, Haninger and Thompson (2004) sampled 80 “teen”-rated video games from a sample of 396 games in release in 2001. 27% of games carried strong sexual themes. Games were significantly more likely to depict female characters partially nude or engaged in sexual activity than male characters. When the authors expanded their definition of “sexual theme” to include “pronounced cleavage, large breasts, or provocative clothing,” the percentage of female characters depicted in this way rose to 46%³⁶.

Moreover violence against women and exploitation in the sex industry is frequently trivialised in video games. For example RapeLay, a Japanese ‘game’ simulating gang rape had to be removed from the retail website Amazon in April 2009³⁷ and the popular game ‘Grandtheft Auto’ has previously featured violence towards women in prostitution and the use of strip clubs. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* enables players to beat a prostituted woman with a baseball bat, complete with screams for help. The incredible realism now possible with such games means players can feel that they are really committing this act.

³¹ More Magazine, July 23 2008, *Want to be FHM's next High Street Honey*

³² FHM and More Magazine are both owned by Bauer Media

³³ N.R. Krassas: ‘Boxing Helena & Corsetting Eunice: Sexual Rhetoric in Cosmopolitan & Playboy Magazines, *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, June 2001

³⁴ Paik, H. (2001). The history of children’s use of electronic media. In D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of children and the media* (pp. 7-27). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

³⁵ Dietz, T. L. (1998). An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: Implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior. *Sex Roles*, 38, 425-442.

³⁶ Haninger, K., & Thompson, K. M. (2004). Content and ratings of teen-rated video games. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 291, 856-865.

³⁷ http://www.equalitynow.org/english/actions/action_3301_en.html

Internet

Pornography is readily available on the Internet³⁸ with newspaper sources estimating that 12% of all web sites are pornography sites, and 25% of all search engine requests are for pornography³⁹. This has a huge impact on the availability of sexualised imagery of women – given that the gendered nature of pornography is well-established in terms of gender stereotyping and sexist portrayal of women and girls⁴⁰.

Lambiase (2003) examined the sexualisation of girls and women on official fan websites of male and female celebrities, which target and attract young women readers. She found that female celebrities were far more likely than male celebrities to be represented by sexualized images, regardless of whether the site was official or produced by fans⁴¹.

Advertising

Advertising is a medium in which women are overwhelmingly sexualised. In a recent study of 72 beer and non-beer ads randomly selected from prime-time sports and entertainment programming, 75% of the beer ads and 50% of the non-beer ads were labelled as “sexist,” and featured women in very limited and objectifying roles⁴². Magazine advertisements also sexualise women and portray them as sexual objects, as frequently shown in studies⁴³. Analyses of photographs from *Maxim* and *Stuff* (two popular men’s magazines) revealed that 80.5% of the women were depicted as sexual objects⁴⁴.

Evidence indicates that such sexual objectification occurs more frequently for women in magazine ads than for men⁴⁵. For example, Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, and Zavoina (1999) found that women were three times more likely than men to be dressed in a sexually provocative way in advertising. In approximately 80% of the ads in their sample, female models were posed in sexually explicit postures. In half of the ads studied, female models were “dismembered” (i.e., body parts were excluded or obscured) by the camera angle or logo placement. This was the case for only 17% of men in ads⁴⁶. Women are therefore disproportionately portrayed as a mere sum of body parts.

Advertising also frequently blurs the division between young and older women – young girls are “adultified” and adult women “youthified.”⁴⁷. This is compounded by the pornification of

³⁸ Griffiths, M. (2000). Excessive internet use: Implications for sexual behavior. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 3, 537-552.

³⁹ English, B. (2005, May 12). The secret life of boys: Pornography is a mouse click away, and kids are being exposed to it in ever-increasing numbers. *The Boston Globe*.

⁴⁰ Itzin, C (1993) *Pornography, Women and Civil Liberties*, OUP:Oxford

⁴¹ Lambiase, J. (2003). Sex—Online and in Internet advertising. In T. Reichert & J. Lambiase (Eds), *Sex in advertising: Perspectives on the erotic appeal* (pp. 247-269). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

⁴² Rouner, D., Slater, M., & Domenech-Rodriguez, M. (2003). Adolescent evaluation of gender role and sexual imagery in television advertisements. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47, 435-454.

⁴³ Baker, C. N. (2005). Images of women’s sexuality in advertisements: A content analysis of Black- and White-oriented women’s and men’s magazines. *Sex Roles*, 52, 13-27; Lindner, K. (2004). Images of women in general interest and fashion advertisements from 1955 to 2002. *Sex Roles*, 51, 409-421; Rudman, W. J., & Verdi, P. (1993). Exploitation: Comparing sexual and violent imagery of females and males in advertising. *Women & Health*, 20, 1-14.

⁴⁴ Krassas, N. R., Blauwkamp, J.M., & Wesselink, P. (2003). “Master your Johnson”: Sexual rhetoric in *Maxim* and *Stuff* magazines. *Sexuality & Culture*, 7, 98-119.

⁴⁵ Plous, S., & Neptune, D. (1997). Racial and gender biases in magazine advertising: A content analytic study. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 627-644; Reichert, T. (2003). The prevalence of sexual imagery in ads targeted to young adults. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 37, 403-412; Soley, L. C., & Kurzbard, G. (1986). Sex in advertising: A comparison of 1964 and 1984 magazine advertisements. *Journal of Advertising*, 15, 46-64.

⁴⁶ Reichert, T., Lambiase, J., Morgan, S., Carstarphen, M., & Zavoina, S. (1999). Cheesecake and beefcake: No matter how you slice it, sexual explicitness in advertising continues to increase. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 76, 7-20.

⁴⁷ Merskin, D. (2004). Reviving Lolita? A media literacy examination of sexual portrayals of girls in fashion advertising. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48, 119-129.

advertising which has seen images from pornography become a normal, mainstream element of popular culture. Images of thin, high sexualised young women now saturate our daily lives⁴⁸.

Products

'Bratz girlz' dolls (marketed to 4-8 year olds) are dressed in sexualised clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas. They are marketed wearing bikinis, sitting in a jacuzzi, mixing drinks, and 'relaxing', while "Bratz boyz" play guitar and stand with their surf boards, poised for action⁴⁹.

Playboy took the sexualisation of girls and women a step further through the direct marketing of a pornographic brand to young people. 'Back to school' Playboy merchandise includes pencil cases, stationary, alarm clocks and make up kits - all carrying the logo of a global pornography brand and marketed to pre-teens and teens⁵⁰. Tesco was forced to withdraw pole dancing kits, complete with fake money and a toy garter, after complaints that they were being marketed as 'toys and games'⁵¹. The same kits continue to be sold in the toys section of retail giant Amazon.

The cosmetics industry increasingly targets younger and younger girls through dedicated product ranges and the giving away of free samples with magazines⁵². From the youngest age, girls are being groomed in the belief that 'being pretty' is a defining attribute for girls and women.

Clothing

Marketing studies show that retailers increasingly sell specific identities to young people via clothing. In this context it is disturbing that girls of younger and younger ages are encouraged to wear clothes that highlight their sexuality⁵³. Examples range from push up bras retailed by Tesco's to girls aged from 7 and 8⁵⁴, 'stripper inspired' thongs marketed to teenage girls and available in children's wear departments⁵⁵.

SUMMARY

The above evidence clearly shows that women and girls are **often under-represented** in the media and popular culture and that where they *are* represented they are **far more likely to be sexualised and objectified**. This is linked to the growing mainstreaming of the sex industry which has seen the 'pornification' of popular culture. The following section reviews the effect of this by joining up the dots between the process of gendered sexualisation and the sexist attitudes that underpin discrimination and violence against women. It also highlights the damaging impact on the health and well being of women and girls as individuals.

⁴⁸ McNair, B (2002) *Striptease Culture: sex, media and the democratisation of desire*. London, Routledge.

⁴⁹ Lamb, S., & Brown, L. M. (2006). *Packaging girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers' schemes*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁵⁰ Mayo, E & Nairns, A (2009) *Consumer Kids: How Big Business Is Grooming Our Children for Profit*. London: Constable.

⁵¹ Retail Week (2006) Tesco removes pole-dancing kit from toys and games site <http://www.retail-week.com/tesco-removes-pole-dancing-kit-from-toys-and-games-site/105151.article>

⁵² American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

⁵³ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

⁵⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1895575/Tesco-accused-over-padded-bra-for-7-year-olds.html>

⁵⁵ Pollett, A., & Hurwitz, P. (2004, January 12/19). Strip til you drop. *The Nation*, 20-21, pp. 24-25.

3 the impact of the sexualisation of women and girls

The sexualisation of women and girls is linked to a range of harms – ranging from body and self esteem issues to violence, sexist attitudes and racism. The links between these issues and a culture in which women and girls are overwhelmingly sexualised is all too often neglected in preventative policy making decisions.

Commercial sexual exploitation

To be treated with dignity is one of the foundations of human rights. To what extent can women claim respect in societies where there are extensive and increasingly legitimised, sex industries? Treating a human being as a ‘thing’ a commodity, means that they are denuded of humanity such that abuse becomes acceptable.’

Dr Liz. Kelly, Equality and Diversity Forum Seminar, London 2006

The portrayal of women as sexual commodities via prostitution and lap dancing contributes to the sexualisation of women in wider society - by legitimising the dehumanising of women into a sum of body parts and promoting the idea that women are always sexually available⁵⁶. This is evident both from analysis of promotional materials for lap dancing clubs (who openly refer to lap dancers as ‘the product’⁵⁷) and websites on which men can post reviews of women they have used in prostitution⁵⁸.



This strip club advertisement appeared in a publication targeting English ‘expats’ in Russia. It demonstrates both the trivialising of sexual harassment and the portrayal of women as sexual commodities.

⁵⁶ Eden, I. 2003 *The Lilith Report on Lapdancing and Striptease in the Borough of Camden*. London: Eaves

⁵⁷ Sherman, William 2007. ‘The Naked Truth about Strip Clubs.’ *New York Daily News*. 08/10/08 URL:<http://www.nydailynews.com>; <http://www.thedrum.co.uk/news/2003/11/27/5297-spearmint-rhino-chief-strips-off-pr-facade-to-reveal-warts-and-all>

⁵⁸ Eg. Punternet; www.punternet.com

Mainstreaming of the sex industry therefore fits directly into the pornification of popular culture – a culture in which women are increasingly portrayed as sexual objects and judged primarily on the basis of how attractive they are⁵⁹. This has a negative impact on the levels of respect that women and girls can expect to receive and grooms men and boys to treat women as sexual objects.

The mainstreaming process has also served to normalise prostitution, lap dancing and other related activities⁶⁰ - making the harm of commercial sexual exploitation invisible. Yet many women in prostitution and lap dancing experience violence and abuse – whether physical or psychological. Studies consistently find high correlation between routes into prostitution and a background of time in care⁶¹ and sexual or physical abuse⁶².

Many women cite poverty and the need to pay household expenses as a primary reason for entering prostitution⁶³ and report problematic drug use⁶⁴. More than half of UK women in prostitution have been raped/and or seriously sexually assaulted⁶⁵ and many survivors of prostitution meet the criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the same range as torture victims and combat veterans undergoing treatment⁶⁶.

Working practices in many lap dancing clubs implicitly encourage men to seek sexual services from performers and women routinely report sexual harassment and violence within the industry⁶⁷.

Women pay a fee to work in lap dancing clubs (often around £80-£100 per night), pay for club outfits and pay fines for being late or missing shifts. High performer to punter ratios mean there is intense competition for the attention of male punters and it is in this context that the buying and selling of sex occurs in some clubs⁶⁸. Even in clubs where licensing conditions are adhered to many women report a heavy psychological toll linked to dealing with, in effect, normalised sexual harassment on a nightly basis.

“When I entered this [lap dancing] I thought it was like showgirls dancing on stage providing entertainment. You’ll [think you will] look like a star, and get paid lots of money for looking like Britney Spears. The reality was very different and the way in which women were treated by club owners was appalling. Many women go into the industry being wrongly sold what it is”.

‘Angela’, a woman formerly in lap dancing

Moreover the mainstreaming of lap dancing clubs has led to the normalisation of sexual harassment in other contexts. A growing body of evidence suggests that lap dancing clubs create ‘no go’ areas for women by reducing their sense of security and entitlement to public space. A six-month review into the licensing of strip clubs in the London Borough of Tower

⁵⁹ Gill, Rosalind(2008), Open University, Speech at launch of Stripping the Illusion campaign launch, House of Commons 22.04.08

⁶⁰ Coy, Maddy; Hovarth, Miranda; Kelly, Liz (2007) *It’s just like going to the Supermarket: Men buying sex in East London*, London Metropolitan University, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, report produced for Safe Exit at Toynbee Hall.

⁶¹ Coy, M. (2007) *Young women, local authority care and selling sex* British Journal of Social Work.

⁶² Home Office (2006) *A Coordinated prostitution strategy and a summary of responses received to ‘Paying the price’*, London: Home Office.

⁶³ Women’s Resource Centre www.wrc.org.uk

⁶⁴ Home Office (2004b). *Paying the price: a consultation paper on prostitution*. London: UK Government

⁶⁵ Home Office (2004a) *Solutions and Strategies: Drug problems and street sex markets*. London: Home Office. Home Office (2004b). *Paying the price: a consultation paper on prostitution*. London: UK Government

⁶⁶ Ramsay, R. *et al* (1993). *Psychiatric Morbidity in Survivors of Organized State Violence Including Torture*. 162:55-59, British Journal of Psychiatry.

⁶⁷ Holsopple, Kelly (1999) *Stripclubs according to Strippers: Exposing Workplace Sexual Violence*

⁶⁸ Bindel, Julie (2004) *Profitable Exploits: Lap Dancing in the UK*, Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University

Hamlets⁶⁹, which received the highest number of contributions in recent years for a public consultation, stated: ‘Many people referred to the impact they felt the venues [strip clubs] were having on the character of the borough, with the following excerpts just a few examples: “my family feel uneasy in walking around streets where strip clubs are based, especially female members”; “I have been leered at and felt intimidated when walking past these clubs”’.

This is reflected in advice issued by the Royal Institute of Town Planning, which has called for women’s views to be sought in all lap dancing applications, in view of evidence showing “that in certain locations, lap dancing and exotic dancing clubs make women feel threatened or uncomfortable”⁷⁰. Use of the sex industry is also linked to gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace⁷¹ - as demonstrated by sexual harassment cases brought by women whose colleagues used both lap dancing clubs and the prostitution industry⁷².

Health and well being

At the individual level gendered sexualisation has extensive negative effects and undermines body self-esteem and confidence in both women and girls. This manifests itself via:

- Constant monitoring of appearance – studies show that women and girls face intense pressure to maintain extracting ‘beauty’ standards. This often results in Body Dysmorphic Disorder and appearance anxiety⁷³ and is affecting women and girls at an increasingly young age. In 2007 the Girl Guiding Association (in collaboration with BEAT Eating Disorder Charity) interviewed girls aged between 7- 10 years and found that many reported serious dissatisfaction with their appearance and weight⁷⁴.
- Eating disorders – BEAT reports that eating disorders disproportionately affect women with between 4% and 20% of young women practising unhealthy eating patterns of dieting, bingeing and purge eating⁷⁵. According to BEAT eating disorders are as common amongst young women as autism⁷⁶. Numerous studies have linked the increased sexualisation of women as sexual objects to the rising incidence of eating disorders⁷⁷.

⁶⁹ London Borough of Tower Hamlets (2008) *Licensing of Strip Clubs*: <http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/your-council/data/works/downloads/scrutiny/strip-clubs-review.pdf>

⁷⁰ Royal Town Planning Institute Good Practice Note 7: Gender and Spatial Planning, December 2007 www.rtpi.org.uk

⁷¹ The Economist 2005 (23 July). Special Report: The conundrum of the glass ceiling –Women in business. The Economist. Vol 376, Iss 8436, pg 67

⁷² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/lawandorder/3448360/Muslim-City-workers-win-multi-million-payout-over-sexual-harassment.html>

⁷³ Fredrickson, B. L., Roberts, T., Noll, S. M., Quinn, D. M., & Twenge, J.M. (1998). That swimsuit becomes you: Sex differences in self-objectification, restrained eating, and math performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 269-284; McKinley, N. M. (1999). Women and objectified body consciousness: Mothers’ and daughters’ body experiences in cultural, developmental, and familial context. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 760-769; Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2001). A test of objectification theory in former dancers and non-dancers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25, 57-64

⁷⁴ See Girl Guiding Association (2007) *Girls Shout Out: Self Esteem – Under Ten and Under Pressure?*

⁷⁵ See <http://www.b-eat.co.uk/PressMediaInformation/FAQsoneatingdisorders>

⁷⁶ *ibid*

⁷⁷ Abramson, E., & Valene, P. (1991). Media use, dietary restraint, bulimia, and attitudes toward obesity: A preliminary study. *British Review of Bulimia and Anorexia Nervosa*, 5, 73-76.; Harrison, K. (2000). The body electric: Thin-ideal media and eating disorders in adolescents. *Journal of Communication*, 50, 119-143;

Stice, E., & Shaw, H. (2003). Prospective relations of body image, eating, and affective disturbances to smoking onset in adolescent girls: How Virginia slims. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71, 129-135; Thomsen, S. R., Weber, M. M., & Brown, L. B. (2002). The

- Plastic surgery – increasing numbers of women and girls are turning to plastic surgery as a shortcut to fulfilling dominant beauty ideals, which frequently stem from pornography. The UK tops the table for plastic surgery spending in Europe⁷⁸ - most of which is spent by women and girls. At the peak of the lads' mags magazine boom in 2005/6 the number of breast augmentations carried out in the UK increased by 150%⁷⁹.

Sexuality

Emerging evidence suggests the sexualisation of women and girls has negative effects on the ability to develop healthy sexuality⁸⁰. Studies have shown that self-objectification on the part of young women often leads to weakened sexual assertiveness⁸¹. At the same time young people increasingly learn about sexual relationships through the media and from pornography, as shown in a 2003 study carried out by Institute of Education which found that 66% of young people reported the media as their primary source of information on sex and relationships⁸². Researchers argue this is “reinforcing the views of many young men that women are always available for sex”⁸³.

A 2005 study of 2,081 young people in Rochdale also found that pornography influences young men's expectations of sexual relationships, “lead[ing] to pressure on young women to comply” and grooming young men and boys to expect sexual acts normalised in pornography⁸⁴.

This is linked to evidence that sexual bullying / harassment is increasingly a problem in UK educational institutions as demonstrated by the WOMANKIND project *Challenging Violence, Changing Lives* - which reported “an alarming prevalence of attitudes which reinforce violent behaviours” as well as gender stereotyping⁸⁵.

“There was quite a lot of low-level sexual bullying in the corridors that we were completely unaware of as a school. Some of the Year 10 girls, especially, began to say “I’m sick of boys touching my bum all the time – they’ve got no right to”.

Male PSHE teacher.

WOMANKIND (2007) *Challenging Violence, Changing Lives: Gender on the UK Education Agenda*

relationship between reading beauty and fashion magazines and the use of pathogenic dieting methods among adolescent females. *Adolescence*, 37, 1-18

⁷⁸ <http://www.cosmeticsurgerybible.com/2008/news/uk-tops-table-for-european-cosmetic-surgery-spending/>

⁷⁹ <http://www.marketresearchworld.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=777&Itemid=>

⁸⁰ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

⁸¹ Impett, E. A., Schooler, D., & Tolman, D. L. (2006). To be seen and not heard: Femininity ideology and adolescent girls' sexual health. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 21, 628-646.

⁸² Buckingham and Bragg (2003) Young people, media and personal relationships, Institute of Education

⁸³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1116554/Could-teenage-boys-lessons-porn.html>

⁸⁴ Redgrave, K. & Limmer, M., (2005) *It makes you more up for it: School aged young people's perspectives on alcohol and sexual health* Rochdale Teenage Pregnancy Strategy.

⁸⁵ <http://www.womankind.org.uk/uk-schools.html>

The dots must be joined between these occurrences and the sexualisation of women and girls in our media and popular culture – as demonstrated by a 2007 report from the Independent Advisory Group on Sexual Health and HIV (IAGSHH), which identified the sexualisation of toys and product advertising as direct influences on young people’s sexual behaviour and values⁸⁶.

Sexism

“The sexualisation of girls and women may contribute to broader societal consequences such as sexism, sex bias and sexist attitudes”.
The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007).

Research shows that frequent, regular exposure to content which sexually objectifies women and girls is linked to the development of sexist attitudes and the acceptance of traditional masculine ideologies, including the objectification of women⁸⁷. This research has also shown that sexually objectifying content is connected to acceptance of gender role stereotyping and attitudes of entitlement in sexual relationships.

Academic research has found that exposure to sexually objectifying material of women affects people’s perceptions or judgements of other women – in ways which again reinforce sexist attitudes⁸⁸.

In its review of the literature on this topic the American Psychological Association states that *“overall it is argued that exposure to sexualised depictions of women may lead to global thoughts that women are seductive and frivolous sex objects... and foster an overall climate that does not value girls’ and women’s voices or contributions to society”*⁸⁹.

A society in which a dominant message is that female worth comes primarily from physical appearance is one in which female aspirations are likely to reflect this. For example surveys in the UK have found that a high proportion of young women aspire to work as ‘glamour models’ or lap dancers⁹⁰. The American Psychological Association links the sexualisation of women in media and popular culture to such aspirations⁹¹.

⁸⁶ Independent Advisory Group on Sexual Health and HIV (2007) *Sex, Drugs, Alcohol and Young People: A review of the impact drugs and alcohol have on young people’s sexual behaviour* London, Department of Health.

⁸⁷ Strouse, J. S., Goodwin, M. P., & Roscoe, B. (1994). Correlates of attitudes toward sexual harassment among early adolescents. *Sex Roles, 31*, 559-577; Ward, L.M., & Averitt, L. (2005, November). *Associations between media use and young adults’ perceptions of first intercourse*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Boston; Ward, L.M., & Friedman, K. (2006). Using TV as a guide: Associations between television viewing and adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behavior. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 16*, 133-156.

⁸⁸ Hansen, C. H., & Hansen, R. D. (1988). How rock music videos can change what is seen when boy meets girl:

Priming stereotypic appraisal of social interactions. *Sex Roles, 19*, 287-316; Gan, S., Zillmann, D., & Mitrook, M. (1997). Stereotyping effect of Black women’s sexual rap on White audiences.

Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 19, 381-399.

⁸⁹ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls* p.32

⁹⁰ mykindaplace.comsurvey of 1,800 teenage girls, 2005

⁹¹ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls* p.33

Racism

The sexualisation and objectification of women is often constructed around ethnicity lines—with much imagery promoting a white hyper-sexualised ideal that fails to represent the diversity of UK women.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic group women have historically suffered stereotypes that focus on their sexuality and bodies – resulting in dominant stereotypes surrounding their sexual attitudes, beliefs and behaviour⁹².

This has been amplified by the mainstreaming of pornography into mainstream culture, increasing the prevalence of porn stereotypes such as black women portrayed in ways which signal animalistic sexuality and women of Asian origin being portrayed as sexually submissive⁹³.

Violence

A significant body of research exists which demonstrates the links between the increased sexualisation of women and girls, mainstreaming of pornography and violence towards women.

Studies have linked stereotypical attitudes about women's sexuality (for example acceptance of rape myths / sexist beliefs about women/ adversarial sexual beliefs) to aggressive sexual behaviour⁹⁴. A growing body of evidence has also joined the dots between media exposure to sexist beliefs and acceptance of violence against women⁹⁵. Analysis has shown that adults exposed to sexually objectifying images of women from mainstream media are significantly more accepting of rape myths, sexual harassment, gender role stereotypes, inter-personal violence than those who were in controlled conditions⁹⁶.

The acceptance of male violence against women and indeed the placing of blame on the female victim rather than the male perpetrator is reflected in general public opinion. For example a 2005 Amnesty International Poll found that 1 in 3 people believed a woman was partly to blame for sexual violence committed against her if she had been drinking or

⁹² Hill Collins, P. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African-Americans, gender and the new racism*. New York: Routledge; Greene, B. (2000). African American lesbian and bisexual women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56, 239-250; Hurtado, A. (2003). Negotiating the color line. In A. Hurtado (Ed.), *Voicing Chicana feminisms: Young women speak out on sexuality and identity* (pp. 176-197). New York: New York University Press.

⁹³ Gill, R (2007) *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press p.79

⁹⁴ Dean, K. E., & Malamuth, N. M. (1997). Characteristics women who aggress sexually and of men who imagine aggressing: Risk and moderating variables. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 449-455; Murnen, S. K., Wright, C., & Kaluzny, G. (2002). If "boys will be boys," then girls will be victims? A meta-analytic review of the research that relates masculine ideology to sexual aggression. *Sex Roles*, 46, 359-375; Osland, J. A., Fitch, M., & Willis, E. E. (1996). Likelihood to rape in college males. *Sex Roles*, 35, 171-183; Spence, J. T., Losoff, M., & Robbins, A. S. (1991). Sexually aggressive tactics in dating relationships: Personality and attitudinal correlates. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 10, 289-304; Truman, D. M., Tokar, D. M., & Fischer, A. R. (1996). Dimensions of masculinity: Relations to date rape, supportive attitudes, and sexual aggression in dating situations. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 74, 555-562; Vogel, B. L. (2000). Correlates of pre-college males' sexual aggression: Attitudes, beliefs and behavior. *Women and Criminal Justice*, 11, 25-47.

⁹⁵ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

⁹⁶ Kalof, L. (1999). The effects of gender and music video imagery on sexual attitudes. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 139, 378-385; Lanis, K., & Covell, K. (1995). Images of women in advertisements: Effects on attitudes related to sexual aggression. *Sex Roles*, 32, 639-649; MacKay, N. L., & Covell, K. (1997). The impact of women in advertisements on attitudes toward women. *Sex Roles*, 36, 573-583; Milburn, M., Mather, R., & Conrad, S. (2000). The effects of viewing R-rated movie scenes that objectify women on perceptions of date rape. *Sex Roles*, 43, 645-664; Ward, L. M. (2002). Does television exposure affect emerging adults' attitudes and assumptions about sexual relationships? Correlational and experimental confirmation. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 31, 1-15.

wearing revealing clothing⁹⁷. A 2009 poll for the Home Office recently found similar results⁹⁸ – suggesting that such attitudes are deeply entrenched in cultural beliefs.

In the U.S., the 1986 Attorney General Commission (known as the Meese Commission) found a causal relationship between exposure to violent pornography and acts of sexualised violence against women⁹⁹.

The transcripts of the public hearings on Ordinances to add Pornography as Discrimination Against Women in Minneapolis (1983) contain evidence from a range of expert witnesses and survivors of abuse about the links with sexual violence and the socialisation processes for men created by pornography¹⁰⁰. Malamuth et al's research (1984) demonstrated that men who watched pornography indicated a subsequent willingness to force women into sexual acts if they thought that such actions would not be punished¹⁰¹.

Boeringer (1994) found a strong likelihood of coercing women into sexual acts with use of pornography featuring rape and sexual violence¹⁰². Zillman and Bryant's research (1988) experimental work demonstrated that exposure to 'non-violent' pornography led to men developing 'callousness' towards women and a trivialisation of rape¹⁰³. Allen et al (1995)'s analysis of research on the effects of pornography found a significant correlation between exposure to pornography and actual sexual aggression as well as attitudes supporting sexual aggression¹⁰⁴.

In a summary of research in 2000, Neil Malamuth concluded that "*Meta-analyses of the experimental literature show that exposure to both non-violent and violent pornography affects both aggressive attitudes and behaviours, and that violent pornography does so to a greater degree*"¹⁰⁵.

The American Psychological Association has also raised concerns about the effect of both the sexualisation of girls and the sexualisation of women as girls (for example in advertising and pornography) on the incidence of child sexual abuse – which is known to disproportionately affect women¹⁰⁶.

The sexualisation of women and 'pornification' of culture also harms boys and men who are pressurised to act out a version of 'being a man' in which power over women is normal. The effect is demonstrated by the fact that only 8% of rapes are stranger rapes¹⁰⁷. The vast majority of rape is carried out by women's current or former partners. This means that it is 'ordinary' boys and men who are committing sexually violent crimes. Men and boys face intense pressure to 'need sex all the time' and this has a damaging impact on the development of attitudes to sex and relationships¹⁰⁸.

⁹⁷ Amnesty International UK (2005) *Sexual Assault Research*: http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news_details.asp?NewsID=16618

⁹⁸ See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/violence-against-women-poll?view=Binary>

⁹⁹ Akdeniz, Y (1997) "Governance of Pornography and Child Pornography on the Global Internet: A Multi-Layered Approach," in Edwards, L and Waelde, C eds, *Law and the Internet: Regulating Cyberspace*, Hart Publishing

¹⁰⁰ Everywoman (1988) *Pornography and Sexual Violence: Evidence of the Links* London: Everywoman

¹⁰¹ Hunter, C (2000) *The Dangers of Porn? A Review of the Effects Literature* @ www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/chunter/porn_effects.html

¹⁰² Malamuth, N.M (2000) *Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Are there reliable effects and can we understand them?* In Annual Review of Sex Research 2000 p.11

¹⁰³ Hunter, C (2000) *The Dangers of Porn? A Review of the Effects Literature* @ www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/chunter/porn_effects.html 24/10/05

¹⁰⁴ Malamuth, N.M (2000) *Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Are there reliable effects and can we understand them?* In Annual Review of Sex Research 2000 p.11

¹⁰⁵ Malamuth, N.M (2000) *Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Are there reliable effects and can we understand them?* In Annual Review of Sex Research 2000 p.11

¹⁰⁶ American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*

¹⁰⁷ *Just representation? Press reporting and the reality of rape* (2008) Eaves Housing for Women

¹⁰⁸ Paul, P (2005) *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*. US: Owl Books

SUMMARY

The argument that the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture has no wider societal effect is seriously unsustainable. It is clear that daily exposure to sexist portrayals of women and girls is linked to a variety of harms and creates a 'conducive context' for violence against women. Any policies aimed towards ending gender inequality and violence against women must make tackling this a key component of effective prevention policy.

4 human rights and gender equality obligations

The UK government has considerable international and domestic human rights obligations to tackle the sexualisation of women and gender stereotyping in the media and popular culture:

- The **United Nations Convention to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** is an internationally legally binding document to which all signatories are bound to act. Since 1979 CEDAW has called on States to take decisive action to tackle objectification, requiring that measures are put in place *“to modify the social and cultural patterns of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women”* (Article 5)¹⁰⁹.
- CEDAW has since repeatedly identified the links between the portrayal of women as sexual objects by the media and commercial sex industry with attitudes that underpin violence and discrimination against women¹¹⁰. Article 6 calls for States to take *“all appropriate legislative and other measures”* to deal with trafficking and the exploitation of the prostitution of women”.
- **Strategic Objective J2 of the UN Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) 1995**¹¹¹ called for all States to tackle unbalanced reporting and portrayal of women in the media, stating that *“the continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society”*. The BPfA recommended that Governments and international organisations undertake to do the following:
 - Promote research and implementation of a strategy of information, education and communication aimed at promoting a balanced portrayal of women and girls and their multiple roles;
 - Encourage the media and advertising agencies to develop specific programmes to raise awareness of the Platform for Action;
 - Encourage gender-sensitive training for media professionals, including media owners and managers, to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women in the media;

¹⁰⁹ 1979 Convention on Ending All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Article 5.

¹¹⁰ Eg. 1993 Convention on Ending All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

¹¹¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/media.htm#object2>

- Encourage the media to refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities, rather than presenting them as creative human beings, key actors and contributors to and beneficiaries of the process of development;
 - Promote the concept that the sexist stereotypes displayed in the media are gender discriminatory, degrading in nature and offensive;
 - Take effective measures or institute such measures, including appropriate legislation against pornography and the projection of violence against women and children in the media.
- **Strategic Objective D2** of the BPfA calls for States to take action to tackle “*factors, including external factors, that encourage trafficking in women and girls for prostitution and other forms of commercialized sex, forced marriages and forced labour in order to eliminate trafficking in women, including by strengthening existing legislation with a view to providing better protection of the rights of women and girls and to punishing the perpetrators, through both criminal and civil measures*”.
 - In 2005, a review of the BPfA stated that there had been “*few advances in the representations in publicity or the news*”. It reiterated the need to “*increase efforts to sensitize mass media journalists and those who work in ICTs to gender and women’s issues, placing special emphasis on how the media contributes to reproducing stereotypes of men and women that reinforce inequalities between the sexes*”¹¹².
 - **Article 9 of the Palermo Protocol** (the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime and its Protocol) requires States to “*discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking*”.
 - The **Gender Equality Duty 2007**¹¹³ requires public authorities to promote gender equality and to eliminate sex discrimination. It requires positive action to be taken to ensure that the different needs of women and men are considered in terms of public authority decisions and take appropriate steps to promote gender equality. This includes countering gender stereotyping.
 - In 2008 the **UN CEDAW Committee** cross-examined UK government officials to assess UK progress in fulfilling CEDAW obligations. On gender stereotyping and the portrayal of women in the media and popular culture it was found that the Government has still not **enacted any** relevant policies. The committee **strongly called for action** to be taken.¹¹⁴
 - The **End Violence Against Women** coalition has repeatedly called on the Government to take action on this issue and has highlighted the sexualisation of

¹¹² <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/english/49sess.htm>

¹¹³ The Gender Equality Duty is contained in the Equality Act 2006 and applies to all bodies carrying out ‘public functions’.

¹¹⁴ 2008 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Concluding Observations on the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Forty First Session)

women and girls as a ‘conducive context’ for violence against women¹¹⁵. Since 2005 ERAW has produced a yearly report monitoring the progress of government departments on tackling violence against women.

- The **Women’s National Commission (WNC)**¹¹⁶ has also consistently raised the sexualisation of women and girls via the media and mainstreaming of the sex industry, as an issue which the Government must address and recommends the following action:
 - that women’s portrayal in the press be regulated by an independent body with clearly defined harm-based codes
 - that the Government fund long-term awareness campaigns, in schools and in public, on the causes of violence and discrimination and that enables critical perspectives on media images, including pornography
 - that the Government runs/supports and funds a national campaign, across all communities, that raises women’s aspirations, tackles cultural barriers and promotes role models and opportunities for women
 - that legislation limits the sale of pornography to licensed outlets
 - that Government ensures the provision of adequate resources for investigations into the possession of extreme pornography
 - that lap-dancing and similar clubs be licensed under the same conditions as sex shops
 - that the Government invests in its prostitution strategy
 - that the Government invests in addressing and reducing the demand side of prostitution
 - that the Government develops effective mechanisms to monitor the off-street sex industry and ensure the women working there are protected from violence, exploitation and coercion
 - that the Government acknowledges the importance of exit strategies through providing adequate investment for such strategies

SUMMARY

The UK is bound to both human rights and gender equality obligations to tackle the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture:

- CEDAW Articles 5 & 6
- Strategic Objectives J2 & D2 of the Beijing Platform for Action
- Gender Equality Duty 2007
- Article 9 of the Palermo Protocol

¹¹⁵ ERAW (2008) *Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations: A Template for an Integrated Strategy on Violence Against Women for the UK*

¹¹⁶ Submission to CEDAW (April 2008) Women’s National Commission

5 current policy

Despite multiple international obligations to take action, we are a long way off gender equality being an integral part of media regulation and there is considerable room for improvement in government policy relating to the sex industry.

Media regulation

All forms of media in the UK, including advertising, are **self-regulated** and not subject to any specific statutory controls on their content or activities. At present there is a **voluntary 1 page** code relating to sexist materials such as lads' mags¹¹⁷. However this was drawn up by the retail industry (with no public consultation), contains no monitoring or evaluation or powers to impose penalties and is framed in terms of 'sexually explicit' material, therefore containing **no gender analysis**.

The press ostensibly regulates itself through the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) – however the PCC contains no powers with which to impose penalties for breaches of its own equal opportunity codes. Moreover, concerns relating to the sexualisation of women tend to be judged by media regulators solely on the grounds of obscenity, decency or privacy¹¹⁸.

Mainstreaming of the sex industry

Following a comprehensive review of prostitution in the UK, the Government recognised prostitution as a form of violence against women¹¹⁹ and has proposed to make it a criminal offence to buy sexual acts from a person coerced into prostitution by force¹²⁰. This measure seeks to reduce the demand for prostitution by making the buyers of sexual acts take greater responsibility for their actions¹²¹.

However this approach is not consistent across government departments. Since 2003 the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has allowed Jobcentre Plus to carry adverts for jobs to be lap dancers, 'masseuruses', strip webcam performers and 'escorts'. It is well known that massage parlour and escort agencies are euphemisms for prostitution and this policy has resulted in the DWP acting, in effect, as a notice board for pimps in the sex industry¹²².

Moreover since 2005 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has allowed lap dancing clubs to be licensed in the same way as cafes and restaurants – with only a simple Premises Licence (otherwise used for leisure venues). This had left local councils powerless to place adequate controls on venues and failed to protect both women working in lap dancing clubs

¹¹⁷ "How to minimise consumer complaints about child exposure to "Grown up's" titles (2006) National Federation of Retail Newsagents <http://www.nfrnonline.com/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=88>

¹¹⁸ Amy-Chinn, D. (2006) This is just for Me(n): lingerie advertising for the post-feminist woman, *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6 (2)

¹¹⁹ Home Office (2006) A Coordinated prostitution strategy and a summary of responses received to 'Paying the price', London: Home Office.

¹²⁰ Clause 13 (Part) Home Office Policing and Crime Bill

¹²¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7735908.stm

¹²² http://www.metro.co.uk/news/article.html?in_article_id=145278&in_page_id=34

as well as those living or working near them. It has also prevented local councils or residents from raising concerns of gender equality in licensing¹²³.

Government policy is therefore contradictory and actively plays a role in the continued mainstreaming of the sex industry.

Summary

In short we have no effective policy to address the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture – despite a range of international and domestic obligations.

A summary of EVAW’s findings related to the sexualisation of women and girls is below:

Year	EVAW assessment of action undertaken by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)	EVAW rating
2008 <i>‘Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations’</i>	<p>“The weakest part of responses in the UK has been prevention, a lack of vision and commitment to the ultimate goal of ending the threat and reality of violence in womens lives. This suggests that prevention needs to be placed at the centre, rather than on the margins. Governments and administrations across the UK should develop approaches, working with the media, to limit sexualisation of women and girls in popular culture, including regulating representations in public space...</p> <p>An integrated approach to VAW will not only highlight the benefits for women and girls of participation in sport, but also women’s safety during the Olympics The association of global sporting events with expansions of the sex industry, including trafficking, and increased reporting of sexual assault were identified during the Athens Olympics and the World Cup in Germany A measure of the success of the games should be robust plans to minimise both, and concerted efforts to break perceived links between sport and paying for sex/coercive sex”.</p>	n/a (no scores given)
2007 <i>‘Making the Grade?’</i>	<p>“DCMS oversees licensing policies for the commercial adult entertainment/sex industry, which is linked to violence against women, especially trafficking, sexual harassment and sexual violence. A significant body of research exists which demonstrates the links between the proliferation of pornography and sexual violence towards women...</p> <p>In its responsibility for print, broadcast and other media, it oversees regulation of, inter alia, pornography on the internet and television; films, DVDs and computer games; and the wider mass media which</p>	0.5/10

¹²³ ‘A Growing Tide: Local Authorities restricted by inadequate licensing of lap dancing clubs’ (April 2008) OBJECT

	<p>may glamorise violence, reproduce gender stereotypes and print images that sexualise and degrade women. All these contribute to a hostile environment for women and girls.</p> <p>There is a wealth of evidence of the inequality of women in the media: research shows that 75% of the UK's news stories are about men; while men make up 82% of spokespeople and 77% of 'experts'. Conversely, women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims in news stories.</p> <p>DCMS do not make any links with violence against women, either in relation to sport or on media representation of women. The connexions with violence against women and their responsibilities to regulate the adult entertainment and sex industry and the broader links to trafficked and other vulnerable, especially young, women, are not made".</p>	
<p>2006 'Making the Grade?'</p>	<p>"DCMS shows no recognition of the links between licensing and violence against women yet there is evidence that in areas where lap-dancing establishments exist, indecent assaults increase by 57% and incidents of rape by 50%65...</p> <p>DCMS is a vital and important Department in terms of the portrayal of women. The absence of any reference to the media at a time when women are increasingly sexualised also seems symptomatic of the Department's failure to recognise the extent to which violence against women and gender equality is a factor in its remit...</p> <p>Indeed, the UN BPfA, includes a strategic objective j.2 of "Promoting a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media." Whilst not widely studied, there is documentation suggesting that international sporting events are accompanied by significant expansions in local sex markets. For the Athens Olympics in 2004, it was estimated that 2,000 women were trafficked into Greece, many lured by false invitations to work in legitimate industries. We are anxious that policies are in place to prevent similar processes for the 2012 Olympics. DCMS can address this by including violence against women in their Tourism Strategy for the 2012 games".</p>	<p>0.75/10</p>
<p>2005 'Making the Grade?'</p>	<p>/</p>	<p>0/10</p>

Year	EVAW assessment of action undertaken by the Home Office	EVAW rating
2008 <i>'Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations'</i>	<p>"Many who would like to exit prostitution are deterred not only by their limited skills/qualifications but also by under-confidence, poverty of aspiration and lack structure and support in their lives; empowerment for women in this situation must address legacies of abuse as a first step.</p> <p>The links between VAW and organised crime, particularly trafficking, sexual exploitation and gang rape, should be addressed through local authorities' work on this PSA"</p>	n/a (no scores given)
2007 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	<p>"On prostitution, policy focuses on kerb crawling, but only a minority of men buy sex` on street`; most trafficked women are in off street prostitution. Lap dance clubs are a form of commercial sexual exploitation, which promote the sexual objectification of women and contradict efforts to promote gender equality. They are licensed in the same way as public houses and cafes, with a Premises Licence. Until they are licensed as Sex Encounter Establishments, local authorities cannot effectively put conditions or restrictions on them, for the safety of the women who work in them or who live near them.</p> <p>The trafficking and prostitution plans both have sections on tackling demand, which is very positive, but the treatment of prevention in the prostitution plan in terms of involvement is almost entirely focused on children and young people, with little on adult women"</p>	6/10
2006 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	<p>"The Home Office is the only department to cite the UN definition of violence against women; but it works mainly to a specific definition of domestic violence, which is also accepted by other Government Departments...</p> <p>While EVAW welcomes the proposals for a Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy for England and Wales, it is concerned that the Department did not attach a dedicated budget or resources for implementation. The Department evidenced strong links with the women's sector and voluntary organisations, collates data on all forms of violence against women and commissions more research than any other Department".</p>	6/10
2005 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	/	3/10

Year	EVAW assessment of action undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions	EVAW rating
2008 <i>'Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations'</i>	n/a	n/a (no scores given)
2007 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	<p>"The question of advertising exploitative jobs in the sex industry has not been satisfactorily addressed, despite the fact that there is research evidence of high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence in this sector...</p> <p>Taking DWP's responses over the last three years together, we see very little improvement; nor has DWP taken up our offer, made every year, to meet us to discuss these issues. In the light of the new GED, this is very disappointing and it is hard to see how they are compliant with the GED at present".</p>	0.5/10
2006 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	<p>"Despite the impact violence against women can have on all elements of DWP's core business, the DWP does not commission research on this issue to inform their policies...</p> <p>EVAW remains concerned that vacancies at lap dancing clubs are advertised in job centres, normalising an exploitative and degrading sex industry".</p>	0.25/10
2005 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	/	0/10

Year	EVAW assessment of action undertaken by the Department for Children, Schools and Families	EVAW rating
2008 <i>'Realising Rights, Fulfilling Obligations'</i>	<p>“Unwanted sexual contact is common in the lives of girls and young women, with implications for physical, mental and emotional health and well-being, we know that the long term effects of sexual abuse in particular can be intense and long-lasting. Addressing VAW across the curriculum, beginning from the principle that safe sex must be consensual sex, self-defence training, alongside ensuring early access to support and therapeutic services can deliver marked improvements in health and well-being in the short and longer terms...</p> <p>Education programmes on VAW, based in a gendered analysis, should be incorporated across school curricula, including forced marriage, FGM and respectful relationships between girls and boys, and men and women</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> _ Whole-school policies on VAW should be encouraged. _ Training on gender and VAW should be introduced in basic teacher training, given priority in PostGraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programmes as well as in-service leaning and Continued Professional Development (CPD) for teachers and headteachers”. 	n/a (no scores given)
2007 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	<p>“Schools are in a good position through the National Curriculum to shape the attitudes children and young people have to gender equality and respectful relationships, tackling violence against women at its roots. Through teaching media literacy they can help children understand the gender stereotypes perpetuated by the media</p> <p>[DCFS is] strong on the role of education in challenging the gender stereotypes which in turn support occupational segregation and thence the gender pay gap. However they fail to make similar connections to the learned gender roles and stereotyping that can lead to violence against women”.</p>	1/10
2006 <i>'Making the Grade?'</i>	<p>“DfES has the potential to fight violence against women from numerous angles. Firstly, it is responsible for the education of young people and is therefore in a key position to ensure that they learn about violence against women as a gender equality issue, including critically assessing the increasing sexualisation of both women and men by the media. It could also ensure that they acquire the skills and knowledge to avoid violent intimate relationships (through PSHE).</p> <p>Sadly, DfES does not seem to take the issue of violence against women seriously, and is nowhere near integrating it into its work..</p>	1/10

	The broader issues of teaching children to build equal and non-violent relationships were not addressed. PSHE continues to be a non-statutory subject and violence against women is not even identified in the existing guidelines. If the Department had a sense of the urgency about these issues, it would take strong action to ensure that learning about these issues was as much a part of young people's educational entitlement as learning to read".	
2005 'Making the Grade?'	/	0/10

These tables say it all about the current state of policy targeted towards tackling the sexualisation of women and cultural attitudes which underpin gender-based discrimination and violence. Firm, effective action is urgently required.

6 countering resistance to fulfilling human rights and equality obligations

Calls to tackle the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture have historically been strongly resisted. This section challenges key claims that are frequently presented to block any action on this issue.

Claim 1: The pornification of culture is simply an issue of ‘obscenity vs free speech’ and free speech should always take precedent.

OBJECT says:

This is not an issue of *offence*; it is an issue of *harm*: Obscenity laws are based on the idea that sexually explicit material is an affront to moral and family values. However, this completely lacks any gender analysis of the pornification of culture – which is linked to discrimination and violence against women. Obscenity focuses on moral opinion, yet violence against women is not a moral debate. Action should be taken to address sexism, not sex per se. Moreover it is a fallacious argument to equate personal liberty with commercial liberty. The two are not interchangeable and should always be differentiated. Multi-billion pound media and sex industries clearly have the loudest voice and it is women and men who want to challenge this culture who are currently silenced.

Claim 2: Women and girls actively choose to be sexualised and to take part in the ‘pornification of culture’ so it should be left to its natural course

OBJECT says:

The pornification of culture is an issue which is far wider than one of individual choice. The wider *impact and harm* of the pornification of culture must be considered and assessed – both in terms of gender equality and violence against women. The issue of choice is also complex and heavily influenced by the media and popular culture. If women and girls are disproportionately sexualised in such mediums is it any surprise that this is then reflected in practices and behaviours?

Claim 3: Action to tackle the sexualisation of women and girls would see all media expressions of sexuality, erotica and art banned

OBJECT says:

This is an argument which in effect acts as a barrier to any policy making, when carried through to its logical conclusion. The ‘slippery slope’ argument ignores the fact that the majority of policy making must be made within set parameters. Similar arguments were made against introducing the offence of ‘incitement to racial hatred’ (as set out in the Public Order 1986) yet the small number of prosecutions for this offence suggest that public authorities actually tend to be overly-cautious in this area. Another example is the use of ‘Sex Encounter Establishment’ (SEE) licensing for peep show venues, which was resisted with calls that this would lead to local councils banning nudity in theatre shows. However SEE licence has been in use for over 20 years in London, in which time no such event has occurred.

Claim 4: Women actively choose to be involved in the commercial sex industry and some enjoy what they do

OBJECT says:

Whilst some involved in the sex industry may state that it provides a satisfactory career choice this does not cancel out the fact that other women and girls do experience exploitation and abuse. Many women and girls choose to be involved in prostitution or lap dancing through *lack of choice* (for example financial hardship or the need to leave an abusive household/ relationship). As pointed out by Rebecca, a survivor of long term prostitution; “*the real choice in prostitution is the choice of a punter not to be violent. Even if he chooses to treat you with ‘respect’ he is legitimising an industry which is used by other punters to be violent or abusive*”.

Crucially, a government should always place the interests of those most vulnerable **first** in all aspects of policy – and this should be no different for the sex industry. The bigger picture of the *impact* of the mainstreaming of the sex industry should also be considered – because the issues raised in this report are clearly far wider than individual choice.

7 legal tools for action

Legal Background

Tackling the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture will involve improved regulation of the media. This is an area of policy-making that is frequently opposed by freedom of expression arguments¹²⁴. However, no human right is absolute and any tension between two rights must be considered in the context of the relevant rights conventions in which they sit - in order to establish where the balance of rights should lie.

In this light OBJECT argues that the right of women and girls to live their lives free of gender-based discrimination and violence should be given equal – if not greater - priority as the right to freedom of speech. Both rights must be assessed and a framework established which places adequate emphasis on ending gender-based violence and discrimination. The framework currently in place gives higher priority to the right to freedom of speech – despite the fact that this ‘right’ is currently being used in ways which reinforce attitudes underpinning gender-based violence or discrimination. Moreover it must be recognised that regulation of the media is not solely, or frequently primarily, about ‘freedom of expression’ but also about economics. Just like other industries the media is regulated by market forces – and it is increasingly clear that market forces alone cannot guarantee socially just outcomes.

Legal instruments

- **Freedom of Expression:** Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) enshrines the human right to freedom of expression – subject to restrictions that account for;
 - a) *‘the respect for the rights and reputation of others’*
 - b) *‘the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals’*¹²⁵.

This means that a policy promoting other areas of human rights (such as tackling the sexualisation of women to end gender-based violence) should not be blocked on the grounds of freedom of expression, if blocking the policy will interfere with the rights and reputation of others (such as a woman’s right to live free from gender-based discrimination and violence).

- **The Human rights based definition of Violence Against Women:** General Recommendation 19 (1992) of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sets out the following international legal definition of VAW; *‘violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman*

¹²⁴ For example in response to OBJECT’s 2005/6 campaigning for independent, social regulation of the media the DCMS stated “This government firmly believes in freedom of expression and not intervening in regulation of the press” (DCMS, 2006).

¹²⁵ Supra no.5 Art.19, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering”.

In order to end such violence CEDAW requires States to take action to change the culture in which violence against women occurs¹²⁶.

- **Article 3 of CEDAW also requires that States** “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men”.

This places the priority of such action very high as the state is not required to simply consider taking action or to ensure respect for the right in question. Rather it is required to **pro-actively** take action and its obligations include respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right of women to live their lives free from gender-based discrimination and violence.

When **comparing different human rights** it is therefore important to identify the following:

- a) Whether either right is ‘absolute’
- b) Identify where each right falls in a ‘hierarchy’ of rights, according to existing UN conventions and therefore compare whether the rights concerned are obligations of immediate (short-term) or progressive realisation (long-term).
- c) Whether one of the rights acts a ‘gate keeper’ to other rights – ie. the right to live free from discrimination is essential for the fulfilment of other human rights
- d) The centrality of either right to human capability or dignity

On all 4 counts the right to a life free from gender-based discrimination and violence against women is higher than the right to freedom of expression. This is not to say that freedom of expression is not an important right. Rather it is to say that in our society freedom of expression is given a higher priority than respecting the human right of women to be free of gender-based discrimination and violence. This has been made clear by the evidence outlined above and by the simple fact that gender equality influenced regulation of the media is currently non-existent in the UK.

The Government should rectify this by taking urgent action to tackle the sexualisation of women and girls – which would act as an important step towards changing the culture in which violence against women occurs.

¹²⁶ CEDAW General Recommendation 19 (1992).

8 recommendations

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

- Gender equality to be mainstreamed into media regulation - at present concerns relating to the sexualisation of women are judged solely on the grounds of obscenity and decency. This must be extended to **gender equality** by bodies such as OFCOM and ASA.
- This regulation should be enacted via **legislation**. Voluntary ‘codes’ have proven meaningless in relation to a long-term impact¹²⁷.
- Anti-racial discrimination legal instruments (such the Public Order Act 1986 and Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006) should be extended to include anti-sex discrimination measures so that incitement to gender hatred is outlawed, in line with incitement to racial hatred.
- Positive incentives for improved media representation to be enacted. A Gender Equality media watchdog should be created and given sufficient powers to actually deliver change. Incentives for positive gender reporting in the media could also be created, as in Spain¹²⁸. Similar steps should be taken in the UK to improve accountability and provide models of best practice.

Department for Children, Schools and Family (DCFS)

- National Curriculum to include media literacy from a gendered perspective to equip young women and men with the tools to identify gender stereotyping and distorted coverage of gender roles.
- Sex Education, PSHE and Citizenship curriculum to include information on the harms of pornography to counter its impact and influence on sexual relations and sexist attitudes.

Home Office

- Lap dancing clubs are currently licensed in the same way as cafes and karaoke bars – preventing any concerns related to sexism or gender equality from being raised. Increasing normalisation of the sex industry should be challenged by ensuring lap dancing licensing reforms apply universally across England and Wales and apply to all lap dancing venues – regardless of how frequently lap dancing is occurring. Licensing reforms must deliver real change and ensure that all lap dancing activities are subject to Sex Encounter Venue licensing.

¹²⁷ See http://www.object.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=17&Itemid=33

¹²⁸ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A6-2008-0199+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

- Prostitution is a form of violence against women and the commodification of women through prostitution contributes to the sexualisation of women in wider society. Crucially many women, children and men experience abuse and exploitation in prostitution and face poor access to exit services. The Home Office should ensure that prostitution is included in any cross-governmental violence against women strategy (as in Scotland) – to ensure that sustainable funding is given to exit services and to ensure that firm measures are taken to tackle the demand for prostitution.
- This should be linked to other policy developments in this area – as currently proposed in the Policing and Crime Bill¹²⁹ – which constitute an important first step towards adopting ‘Nordic’ policy on prostitution. This approach decriminalises all persons selling sexual acts and provides support services and exit strategies to those currently in prostitution whilst criminalising the buyers of sexual acts to curb the demand which fuels prostitution and trafficking. The Home Office should introduce legislation which *fully* matches this approach – current proposals go only part of the way by criminalising the purchase of sexual acts from persons “subject to force”.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

- Since 2003 Jobcentre Plus has carried adverts for positions as ‘lap dancers’, ‘masseuses’, strip webcam performers and ‘escorts’. It is well known that ‘massage parlour’ and ‘escort agency’ are euphemisms for prostitution and it is alarming that government job agencies are legitimising the exploitation and abuse experienced by many women and girls in prostitution. This also legitimises attitudes described in this report linked to the sexualisation of women and girls. We therefore urge the Department for Work and Pensions to reverse this policy¹³⁰.

¹²⁹ <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09/policingandcrime.html>

¹³⁰ For more information please see our briefing on this topic <http://www.object.org.uk/index.php/job-agency-and-ads-for-sex-industry>

9 conclusion

The evidence outlined in this report has firmly joined the dots between the sexual objectification of women and girls to a negative effect on individual health and well being – with increased sexualisation leading to severe dissatisfaction over body image and self esteem; high rates of eating disorders among women and girls; rising levels of women turning to plastic surgery; increased incidences of sexual bullying and damaging sexual relations between young people.

It has been shown that the sexual objectification of women is also linked to the promotion and reinforcement of sexist attitudes – via exposure to media which overwhelmingly contains gender stereotyping and affects perceptions of all women. This has significant overlap with racism via the objectification of women according to their ethnicity. Finally a large body of evidence demonstrates the connection between the sexualisation of women in the media and popular culture with violence against women.

In this context it is of absolute importance that the Government takes strong, effective action to tackle the sexualisation of women and girls in the media and popular culture and this must form a crucial part of any prevention strategy. Popular arguments against such action are centred around the human right to freedom of expression. However, such a right must be weighed against the need and importance of taking effective steps to protect the human right of women and girls to live their lives free of gender-based violence and discrimination.

The current UK framework heavily prioritises the right to freedom of expression – ignoring the fact that regulation of the media is not solely about freedom of expression but is also about economics. In terms of gender equality and reducing violence against women the media currently faces no meaningful obligations or incentives yet it is increasingly clear that market forces alone cannot guarantee socially just outcomes. Mainstreaming of the sex industry and commercial sexual exploitation should be challenged in a consistent way across government. The Government must take decisive action across work carried out by the DCMS, DWP, Home Office and DCFS.

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about OBJECT

OBJECT is the human rights organisation whose goal it is to challenge the increased sexual objectification of women in media and popular culture, because of its links to discrimination and violence against women. We raise awareness of these links by lobbying, campaigning and providing information to both colleagues in the women's rights sector and human rights activists as well as working with grassroots activists, student and trade unions. We lobby policy makers for change and have a proven track record of organising lively grassroots activism across the UK to ensure that the sexual objectification of women is debated at both a public and political level.

Our **vision is of a society free of sexism**, in which women are represented in their full diversity.

This will be a crucial step to achieving full human rights for women and must involve **tackling gender stereotyping and the objectification of women in the media** - as has been consistently pointed out by the UN Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) since 1979.

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